

## **Not Bitter, Not Sweet** by Nomad1

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## Not Bitter, Not Sweet

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### Not Bitter, Not Sweet

Stan the Man, Richie felt, was insufficiently impressed with his feat of daring.

"I bled for this treasure, you wet," he said. "Fought my way through the jungle, past the pit traps and man-eating tigers and poisonous snakes, and into the temple guarded by eleven-foot-tall killer cannibals."

For some reason he hesitated there instead of launching into the rest of his planned tale of adventure, remembering... well, it must have been a nightmare he'd had when he was a little kid, about the great big plastic statue of Paul Bunyan leaning over him. Something tickled at the back of his brain, something that said *you forgot something, didntcha, Richie-boy?* Only not really forgotten at all, because it was right *there*, like a sneeze waiting to come out; like the crunch, or worse, the squish, when you knew you'd stepped in something bad but you hadn't looked down yet.

"They're called venomous snakes, numbnuts," Stan said, and Richie shook off a chill that had no business crawling down his collar on a sticky-sunny afternoon strolling up Centre Street Hill. "And your dad's going to give you heck if he finds out you took that." His face was creased by a tense little frown, as if he expected Mr Nell to jump out of a doorway and accost them for their contraband cargo at any moment.

"Ees thee perfect crime, senhorr," Richie said. "Cops baffled, newspapers shocked - Ellery Queen is on the case but he ain't got nuttin' on me."

He'd been fast and daring and outright dazzled himself with his own bravery and genius for thinking it up right there on the spot. His father had casually said, after a lunchtime family gathering had finally dispersed, "While you are up in that kitchen, Rich, perhaps

you could see your way to bringing me one of those beers on the counter, assuming your good uncles have left me any behind?"

And Richie had seen there were not one but *two* beers still left on the kitchen counter, and smooth as smooth he'd carried one out to his dad and said - or rather Toodles had said, because it wasn't really lying when you were *doing a character* - "Just the one left, guv'nor. Better toddle the old empties straight on over to the bally market for a few shillings pip-pip, ay-wot? Support the war effort and all that rot."

His father had given him a stern look over the newspaper, and just for a second Richie had been in danger of getting a little damp about the underwear as he contemplated confessing all his sins and throwing himself on his dad's mercy. But instead of asking what exactly had happened to the second bottle of beer, all his dad said was, "And just what percentage of the proceeds were you intending to charge as a transportation fee, O conniving little fruit of my loins?"

And so, not two minutes of haggling later, Richie had been whistling on his way with twelve cents' worth of empties and the true prize safely tucked down at the bottom of his paper sack.

Alas, the trouble with spontaneous acts of cat burglary was that they didn't leave much opportunity to alert one's chums to come and share the spoils. He didn't quite have the confidence to go knocking on doors with his illicit treasure - Eddie Kaspbrak's mother, for sure, would need an asthma inhaler of her own at the idea of someone bringing even empty beer bottles within reach of darling baby Eds - so he'd been forced to wander the streets, growing increasingly dejected as he checked all of his usual haunts and found no sign of anyone.

(In fact, Richie had actually encountered several boys he knew from school in Bassey Park, all of whom would be satisfyingly awed at the production of a real bottle of beer, but even though he'd been looking high and low for someone to impress, he had moved on without the thought ever once entering his mind that he might show it to any of them.)

But as soon as he'd seen Stanley Uris bopping along with his crisp

white shirt and perfectly combed hair, he'd known Stan was exactly the sort of person he'd been hoping to find. Even though Stan was a wet end who didn't want to share his beer or even hold it.

"Relax, my man," Richie told him. "We're free and clear! There's no one here to give us any static." He'd been keeping a *very* close eye out for Mr Nell or any other patrolmen during the afternoon's wanderings.

Which didn't stop him from jumping and letting out a panicked squawk as something cold jabbed him in the small of the back. Stealing a beer - not even stealing, really, since it had come from the countertop in his very own house - surely couldn't be a *shooting* offence!

Then the sound of bright girlish laughter from behind him made his stomach flip over in a wholly different way, and he turned to see Beverly Marsh standing behind him in a faded tartan skirt and baggy pink sweater. She grinned at him and slurped on the straw of the ice-cream frappe container she'd used to stick him up with. The sight, on top of his weak knees from the sudden fright, left him quite overcome, and he reacted the only way he knew how - collapsing to his knees melodramatically in front of her.

"Sure an begorra, me foine girl, yer a sight to gladden me old Irish heart, so y'are!" he said, clutching his chest.

Bev giggled again and nudged him with the toe of her penny-loafers. "Get *up*, Richie," she said, glancing around to make sure nobody was watching them. Nobody was; right now Centre Street was sleepy-quiet in the sun.

*But sleeping with one eye open, like a cat that's just been fed and won't bother to chase the mouse, but might still pounce if it wanders too close,* he thought - and then forgot the thought as fast as he'd had it when his bowed-down position gave him just a glimpse of a little further up beyond Bev's knee than the skirt was supposed to show. As she smoothed it down, he scrambled up, feeling flushed, and brought the paper sack with his purloined beer around in front of him.

"Hi, Stan," she said, and much to Richie's consternation, sucked on

the frappe straw again, producing the familiar noise of the last drops resisting being caught in the bottom of a near-empty container. He might not like Bev *that way*, but all the same, he had to admit it gave him something of a shiver that he certainly never got when Ben or Eddie did that.

No sign of them, or Bill, or Mike, but collecting together as a three was good enough. That was the way it was, these days: they drifted around in ones and twos, sometimes crossing each other's paths, but never just naturally falling together in one big group the way they had back in the summer of '58. They were older, busier; Mike had more chores on the farm, or Eddie had to take summer make-up classes because he'd had so many sick days, or just somehow in some way they were never all around at the same time. And summer didn't seem to stretch forever the way it had anymore; the fleeting days ran away all too fast.

*Leaving the kiddie table behind, Richie, my man*, he thought, and all of a sudden he wasn't sure if he wanted the stolen beer that seemed like such a heavy, almost accusing weight after all; had a wild urge to just forget it and suggest they go down to the Barrens to play at being jungle explorers or cowboys or space adventurers one more time. But he knew instinctively that they couldn't go back now. The same old magic of just playing pretend wouldn't work for them the same way anymore.

*(Battery acid, fucknuts*, he heard Eddie's voice yell in his head, and with it came a blurt of remembered nausea, the feeling of his fist sinking into something squishy and yet horribly *solid*-)

Suddenly he desperately needed something to wash away the sour taste of remembered fear before he puked his guts up here and now.

He reached into the paper sack he was holding. "Sho, how's about you join us, shweetheart?" he said to Bev. "Can I interest you in," he produced the beer with a flourish, "the clean, clear taste of Rheingold Extra Dry?"

Bev's exclamation of wide-eyed amazement was all it took to chase away the shivers that had fallen over him, and he regaled her with the tale of his daring heist as they made their way round to Richard's

Alley. Mostly even the true version, though he added a few close shaves for extra drama. You had to give the audience some spectacle.

They settled down against the rear wall of the Centre Street Drug Store. Bev tugged at her skirt to try and stretch the too-short fabric to a more concealing length, which only made Richie notice it more than if she'd left it alone. Not that he was deliberately looking, but it definitely caught his eye in a different way than watching Stan fussily smooth down his shirt where it tucked into his jeans.

"Did you bring a bottle-opener?" Bev asked, and Richie's stomach dissolved along with his plan. He'd been so busy sneaking out with his prize he hadn't given a thought to how they were actually going to open it. He couldn't have taken the one from home in any case; that would have meant picking it up from the arm of his dad's chair and pretending he was taking it back to the kitchen, and for sure his dad would have smelled a great big ugly stinker of a rat when it came to Richie voluntarily taking on dumb little domestic chores that weren't even big enough to earn him an advance on his allowance.

"I have one on my knife," Stan said. He took out a folding pocket knife from the pocket of his jeans and carefully levered out the bottle opener attachment. He carefully popped the cap off and then handed the beer bottle back to Richie, fastidiously wiping his hands clean even though he hadn't gotten any spilled on him. Beverly picked up the bottle cap to spin around on the cobbled ground.

Richie pulled down his imaginary Bogie hat and tipped the beer at her. "Here'sh looking at you, kid," he said.

Lost in the role, he tilted it back to drink with a little too much enthusiasm and then had to make a quick, inelegant gulp to catch it with his mouth before he poured beer down the front of his shirt. Bev laughed as he took an eye-watering slug that was much bigger than he'd planned and wiped his chin off, spluttering. Stan grimaced and looked away.

"It's an acquired tashte, shweetheart, an acquired tashte," Richie excused himself. Actually, he wasn't sure that it tasted of much at all; if anything, the flavour was a little bit like cereal, which was kind of a letdown after all the effort he'd gone through to get it.

Maybe it was supposed to get better when you'd had enough to get drunk. He took another swallow. "Boy, that sure is a dry beer, all right," he said, and hoped neither of them actually asked him what that was supposed to mean. If Ben or Eddie had been here one of them might have, but Stan was more interested in carefully unfolding each of the blades of his pocket knife to check it was clean and fit them back in just right.

Richie offered the bottle to Bev, and she lifted it to take a confident swig, the sleeve of her loose sweater slipping back to show a ring of fading bruises round her wrist. He might not want Bev to be his girl - that place of honour in his fantasies was currently reserved for the lovely Yvette Vickers, whom he had seen twice in Attack of the Giant Leeches, though it was subject to change on a whim - but he had to admit to a slight guilty thrill at watching her tip her head back to drink from the bottle that his own lips had touched only moments ago.

She licked her lips as she handed it back, and Richie shifted his legs from stretched out to bent up in front of him and turned to thrust the bottle out at Stan. "Your turn, Stanny, me boyo." But as Stan reached for it, Richie had a sharp and sudden urge to yank it back - not just for the chucks, but at the surfacing of part of a memory, like a shark fin appearing above the water. A broken Coke bottle, and Stan goofing like he was gonna cut his wrists - goofing with an oddly serious look on his face.

But then Stan took the bottle from him and the moment passed. His fingers were warm where they brushed Richie's, and Richie was struck by the strange certainty that they had once held hands, though he couldn't for the life of him imagine when and why they would have done such a thing. Rather than try to remember, he quickly shook the thought away, with a newly-minted teenager's instinctive mortification at the things he had done back in that far-distant time when he was Still A Kid.

Stan polished the mouth of the bottle thoroughly before taking a single small sip with an oddly solemn air, as if sealing a pact. He handed the bottle back, and that was all that he would take, though Richie offered it again after he and Bev had traded it back and forth a second time.

So the two of them finished it together, swapping it between them. Richie wasn't totally sure how you were supposed to tell if you were getting drunk. In the movies people slurred their words and stumbled into things, but his dad never seemed much different except maybe a bit more ready to smile at some of Richie's gags (Richie preferred to think of this as a relaxation of the façade that hid the fact he was always laughing on the *inside*) and more likely to fall asleep in his chair.

He did feel a little giddy as he drained the last of the bottle, but maybe that was just the triumph of having gotten away with his plan and spending a sunny afternoon trading bottles with a pretty girl who was leaning a just little bit on his shoulder. He felt wildly bold and very grown up.

He held the empty beer bottle up to make sure that there wasn't a drop left inside - and let out an almighty belch that echoed off the alley walls.

"Richie!" Bev said, and then giggled helplessly.

"Gotta tesht my new material shomehow, shweetheart," he said, and she laughed harder.

"Cleverest thing he's said all day," Stan said.

"You want to clean that pocket knife again after you wound me like that, Uris?" Richie said, clutching his gut and miming deep injury.

Beverly plucked the bottle from his hands to wobble on the ground between hers. "Shall we trade this in and get some penny candy?" she asked.

Even though Richie had planned to do just that with the twelve cents sitting in the pocket of his jeans from the other empties, it seemed to him now that this was kid stuff, and unworthy of a man who had just had - half of - his first beer.

"I heard that in high school they all play Spin the Bottle," he said, taking the bottle back to move across the alley from them and lay it down on the cobbles.



"You mean like Truth or Dare?" Bev asked.

"I don't want to play dares," Stan said, drawing up his knees in front of him.

They had never played Truth or Dare between any of them, but Richie knew instinctively that it was a game they could no longer play. All the truths that mattered had already been shared, and no schoolyard acts of bravery could mean anything now.

But that was middle school stuff anyway. "The high school version is different," Richie told them authoritatively. "In high school, you spin it and then you have to kiss whoever it points at."

"Really?" Bev asked, her eyes wide.

He nodded. "Chet Morton said his brother said everyone does it." Chet had also said that sometimes they did other things than kissing, but while Richie might have discussed such an idea with Stan and the other boys, he blushed at the thought of saying so in front of Bev.

"Sure, that'd be flippy, but you can't play a game like that with three people," Stan said. "You need at least-" Richie was sure he was thinking 'seven', because that was the same number that had popped into his head as a right sort of number, a magic number. But there was no reason to think of that number in particular now, and Stan must have thought the same, because he cut off and then just said, "Well, you need more than three."

"I don't mind," Bev said. "We can play if you want, Richie." She gave him a stern look. "But you'd better give it a really good spin. Don't just nudge it round a little bit to point where you want.."

"You keel me with your lack of trust een me, senhorreeta," he said, and eagerly fumbled to lay the bottle down and whirl it round so that it bumped unevenly over the cobbles. It made three wobbly circles and then gradually started to slow down. As it passed Beverly by for a fourth time, Richie crossed his fingers, willing to make it through another circuit, but instead it just slowed, slowed...

And finally came to a stop, pointing straight back at Richie himself.

Bev burst into fresh gales of laughter, and even Stan cracked a smile.

Well, who was he to argue? "Alone at last, shweetheart," he said to his own hand. "Oh, Richie, I love you!" he made it say back with high-pitched ventriloquism. Then back to Bogart again. "That's right, shweetheart. I'm all yoursh." He swept it up in an embrace with his other arm and gave it a passionate smooch.

"Stop!" Bev said, holding her stomach as she laughed. She hooked the bottle back towards her with her foot and sat up, leaning forward to spin it. She managed a much neater flick of the wrist than Richie's that set it to rotating rapidly almost on the spot, and Richie held his breath as it went round and round.

It came to a halt pointing a few inches to the left of Stan's high-tops. Stan he drew his legs in nervously as if to move them out of the way.

"One for Stan the Man!" Richie crowed.

"That doesn't really count," Stan said. Man, that boy sure had to be crazy to be such a stickler for the rules he tried to talk a pretty girl *out* of kissing him.

"It almost counts," Bev said, and leaned across to kiss him on the cheek. Richie couldn't quite see down her sweater when she leaned, but it was an angle that made him *think* about the fact that he couldn't quite see down her sweater, and he squirmed. Stan just blushed and hunched his shoulders a little bit.

Richie nudged the bottle over towards him, but he made no move to take it. "This is stupid," he said. "I told you it was pointless playing this with only three people."

"You've gotta take your turn, my man," Richie said. "It's in the rules." Or else Richie would lose his chance to steal a kiss from Beverly, which he sort of wanted to try - but you couldn't just *ask* a girl to practise kissing with you when you still wanted to be just friends, or at least, Richie didn't know how. It was safer if it was a game, just like with the Voices.

Stan rolled his eyes and leaned down to give the bottle a very

perfunctory nudge. It didn't even turn through a whole circle, but rocked to a halt pointing away toward the mouth of the alley. "Jeez, looks like I'm all out of luck," he said dryly. "What a shame."

"One more go around," Richie insisted, reaching forward to collect up the bottle. He hadn't gotten to kiss Bev yet, and that just wasn't fair.

He did his best to figure the spin just right so it would end up pointing her way - but he'd always been blessed or cursed with a hyperactive energy that made his attempts at games of skill twitchy at best. Instead of ending up on Beverly, it rocked on past again... and wound up pointing squarely towards Stan instead.

Well, really, there was only one logical thing for a man to do in such circumstances.

"Stanley!" he cried, throwing his arms wide and channelling his Great-Aunt Ida, who had been a real believer in planting sloppy kisses on squirming great-nephews who just wanted to escape her stifling embrace and flee upstairs. "Come to me, my little sugar pumpkin pie!"

Bev giggled as he launched himself across the circle in a surprise attack. Stan, still backed up against the rear wall of the drugstore, didn't have any way to move except to freeze up as he pounced. Having a natural instinct for the humour of the outrageous and not much of an internal moderator to guide him on when to unleash it, Richie threw himself across Stan's lap and planted one straight on his lips.

Not being one of the world's great forward planners, it hadn't occurred to him to consider the result of this action beyond how it would look to the hypothetical audience that existed in his head for all his stunts. He was slightly startled to discover that, like the song said, a kiss was still a kiss, even when it was supposed to be a gag.

Not that Richie had a great deal of experience in that area. His lone conquest thus far had been a girl called Cheryl Slate, who was so in love with Buddy Holly that she'd decided for the space of a single heady afternoon that Richie looked enough like him to be an acceptable substitute. Their one kiss had been awkward and scary-

exciting and a little bit too wet, and though he hadn't liked Cheryl that much he'd still been a little bit disappointed that she hadn't been willing to attempt a few encores so he could get the hang of it.

Kissing Stan was surprisingly not very different, except for being maybe a little bit less wet. Richie could swear Stan's lips firmed up for just a moment if he was kissing back before he pushed Richie off of his lap with a bit more force than it needed.

"Don't be an asshole, Richie," he said crossly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Richie had the disquieting sense that it had somehow been a crueller joke than he'd meant it to be - crueller, maybe, than it might have been to play the same on Big Bill or on Eddie - though he didn't quite know why. Or maybe he did sort of know why, but it was back in the shadows of the same not-thinking space as (*IT*) that past summer, a truth best kept disassembled like a jigsaw because putting it together would only bring out some deep hurt that he lacked the resources to mend.

Self-restraint was not a common friend to Richie, and he sat back on his heels, feeling discombobulated. As Bev leaned forward to pick up the bottle again, he scrambled back out of the way, uncharacteristically unsure how to break the growing silence.

A problem that became moot as Bev let out a sudden sharp shriek, flinging the bottle away from her to crash against the side of a trashcan. They all jumped up, Richie's breath tightening in his chest like he needed a blast of Eddie's inhaler. *Not again*, he thought, and barely knew that he was thinking it. The palms of his hands throbbed.

"What is it?" Stan demanded, sounding almost angry, indignant, though his face was so pale he looked like he was about to faint.

"I thought I saw-"

A window slammed open above them, making them all jump again, and a ragged voice yelled out. "Hey, you kids, get out of here before I come down there!"

They didn't need a better excuse to flee from the alley, sprinting all the way down Centre Street Hill and along Court Street until Richie's jellied legs could take no more and he flopped down on a bench. "What did you see?" he finally asked Beverly as he sat, panting. Stan jerked a little, as if he'd been going to say something but swallowed it, and Richie thought perhaps he'd rather Richie hadn't asked at all.

But Bev just hesitated and then shook her head. "Nothing, I guess," she said, smoothing her hair back down. "I must have just imagined it." But there was something both stubborn and nervous in her expression, as if perhaps she didn't so much really think that as *want* to think she thought that.

Richie opened his mouth to confess that brief instant when he'd looked back over his shoulder - looked back for just a moment, and seen the beer bottle lying there in a spreading pool of (*shadow, it must have been the shadow of the trashcan*) what had looked a lot like blood... but then he looked at Stan's tense face, and stayed silent.

The Richie of not long earlier who'd felt impressively grown-up to be sharing beer and playing kissing games seemed impossibly, almost painfully young and far away.

It was Bev who finally broke the absolute stillness, raising her hand up to her mouth to huff on it. "Does my breath smell of beer?" she asked them worriedly.

Richie pulled the crumpled pack of Winstons from his pants pockets and offered her one before lighting one for himself. He offered the pack to Stan as well, though he knew he wouldn't take one.

Indeed, Stan just stepped away instead. "I better go," he said. "My mom's expecting me back home." But Richie had a hunch it might be more that he just wanted to get away from the two of them before they tried to talk about anything that had happened.

"Me too," Bev said. "I have to fix my dad's supper."

"Yeah," Richie said vaguely. He had no special reason why he should be back home - had, in fact, planned to stay out until the last possible moment in hopes that his dad would forget all about having asked for

a beer and Richie taking off with all the empties and one not-so-empty - but now he found he wanted nothing quite so much as to be sitting at the table at home with his parents, defending the merits of his favourite horror movies and being interrogated on how well he'd done his chores.

"We should get everybody together next week," Bev said as they walked back together, Stan leading the way some few paces ahead with his hands stuffed in his pockets and his shoulders tight. "We could go see a movie or something." They made noises of agreement, but somehow Richie knew it would never happen. It would drift on as an idea for another week or two, and maybe they'd even scrape three or four of them together eventually, but then the summer would be up and school back in session before they'd managed to collect all of them together in one place.

And then another year would go by, and they'd all get busier - if all of them were even still around. He knew that Bill had said his parents were thinking about moving away, and Ben had mentioned something about his mom maybe needing to look for a new job soon. It seemed to him that by the time next summer rolled around they might well be six, or five, or even four.

As the three of them split up on Centre Street and went their separate ways, Richie found himself thinking about movie monsters. Sometimes they were dead by the end of the movie, but other times, you'd see the good guys ride off into the sunset while the monster's corpse was left behind looking as dead as it could be... but then, just before the end credits rolled, you'd see it give a twitch.

Just a little twitch. Not getting back up yet, a long way from recovered... but not dead yet, either.

And he thought that maybe there would come a time when the seven of them *would* get back together again, someday, somehow.

Because when the monster twitched like that, you knew that that sooner or later it would be coming back for the sequel - and it was always bigger and badder the second time around.